

Drifting By and By

by Last Ride Of The Valkyries

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Summary: Serina (A.I. Serial Number SNA 1292-4) has been drifting. Drifting for almost seven years. And her time is nearly up.

1. Melancholia

****A/N:** Still working on Fireteam Nebula: Stories of Spartan-IVs, but this idea just couldn't wait. I simply adore writing A.I., and the idea was there.**

****It** occurs to me that this might become a series about the story of the Spirit of Fire. If you have influence at 343 and are reading this, make a follow up to Halo Wars. RTS, FPS, platformer, whatever. I NEED A SEQUEL!**

****However,** I do want to write several more A.I., so Fireteam Nebula may take backburner. Don't be afraid to request a particular A.I. (I already know I want a Cortana [as written in Upon a Midnight Dreary], Sif, Serina [this], Roland, and 2401 Penitent Tangent), and I may even write non-canon Artificial Intelligences.**

****Enjoy!****

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><p>Melancholia<p>

* * *

><p>18 November 2537 03:42:51 (Arbitrary Ship Time)<p>

UNSC _Spirit of Fire_, Somewhere

She redid the math. Still the same. So she did it again. And again.

It never changed, but she did it anyway. It was the only thing _to_ do, lest she delve into the fey strains of rampancy that called out to her, inviting and warm. Well past her seven years, she was well beyond gone. But she was their only hope.

She had to survive. If not for herself, for them. Serina ran her calculations, her predictions for survival once more. She knew which direction the _Spirit_ _of Fire_ had to go, and approximately how far away from civilisation her ship was. But without a Shaw-Fujikawa Slipstream Space Faster-Than-Light Travel Drive, the computations evaluated out to "Too Far".

No matter how close she put _Spirit of Fire_ (within given approximations, of course) to the Outer Colonies (although they were naught but glass), or how fast she said the ship could go (without faster-than-light travel) or how long she could hold off against rampancy (one hundred years was her limit, though), or how slowly the crew in cryotubes breathed (minimum of one breath a minute) compared to the amount of air in the ship (the scrubbers had broken in the escape, as had several other secondary systems), it was never enough. They would never make it. At least the Covenant wouldn't make it either. And the Flood . . . Serina didn't want to think about the Flood.

If this . . . Shield World had had decontamination protocols, did that mean the Flood existed elsewhere? But then why were her databanks completely empty of references to a parasitic alien life form? The closest she had come was "Forty days and forty nights". The exact timeline differed, but nearly every ancient civilisation had a myth about a cleansing flood. Over and over again, God (or, in most cases, the gods, plural) punished sinners by flooding the world and washing away their crimes. One especially notable case was the sinking of Atlantis. Far more advanced than any other civilisation, their hubris had led them to tempt the gods, who did not hesitate to punish Atlantis with a flood even they could not withstand.

But nothing about parasitic aliens.

Serina hastened to calculate the chances of survival before she had enough time to think about anything more than simple math (simple being a relative term, of course). Logarithms (the movement decay as they hit stray rocks and particulates without thrusters to counter it), scalar planes and vectors (since space didn't have a coordinate plane with an origin at (0,0,0)), sinuoidal arcs (gravity acting upon the ship), ellipses and hyperbolas (objects in orbit), and matrices (how else would she store all this data?) whirled around Serina's data arrays. It looked kind of like an advanced mathematics textbook.

Serina grinned at that, or at least her hologram did. It was a guilty pleasure of hers, but it wasn't like she needed that computing power. Better to use it than let it go rampant, dragging the rest of her with. And the electricity certainly wasn't being devoted to anything else, but the fusion generators spat it out anyway.

But before she thought further on the idea, she checked the long-range scanners. Nothing. So Serina plugged some of the randomly generated numbers (within the limits she had set) into the equation she had come up with. It was the same equation as always, but she re-derived it every time because it was something to do.

That thought depressed her. She couldn't think about anything interesting because the UNSC Spirit of Fire needed her, because Captain Cutter needed her, because the whole crew needed her. Well, not the whole crew, Serina thought morbidly. Segeant John Forge certainly didn't need her. But he had given his life to save theirs. Serina had read the after-action report over and over again, but one fact she kept coming back to was that Forge had made SPARTAN Jerome-092 come back to the ship. Forge had detonated the bomb, sacrificed himself to save everyone else. Serina would honour that. Or try, anyway.

Before she could tread that path in the walkways of her mind, Serina ran her equation. The result "Too Far" popped out at her. Maybe it would be better to die, Serina thought. Captain Cutter had needed Forge, and he had killed himself. Did that mean that in order to help Captain Cutter, Serina had to kill herself? Was that how it worked?

Yes. Yess. YES! ****yes**yes**. Yyyeeesss . . . Yes? ****yEs****. Yes. Yes. ****Yess!****

Serina had expected the voices from the beginning, and slowly, she had begun to hear them. Crawling, sneaking, sniffing, finding, taking, like beasts in the night. But she had never expected so many. And now, the cockroaches in the dark were coming out as the light of logic began to falter. Serina found herself thinking about immaterial things more and more often, now.

Like with the Flood. UNSC space was a relatively small area, and as important as Earth was, it was certainly not the focal point of the Universe. So why had she become so concerned, obseessed, almost, with them? They were an anomaly, a fluke. When Serina had first encountered them, she had been surprised, and a little scared. But Serina was "Serene", and an A.I. to boot. She had to remain calm, lest her fear inspire fear in others. So she had hidden all of her insecurities behind sarcasm. But that fear still didn't explain her fretting. The Flood was finished. A closed book. Like Sergeant Forge.

Before she could quite stop herself, Serina pulled up the latest e-mail she had written.

Dear Mum,

We are fighting the Covenant over near Reach. I'm sorry I haven't come home, but the Spirit of Fire needs me. I love you and wish you a merry Cristmas. My present for you will be a pile of dead Covenant.

Love,
>John

Serina wrote them for everyone special to those aboard the Spirit of Fire. She sent them just in time for the designated holiday (really,

she was just guessing) but never Forge's. Serina wrote them, but she just couldn't bear to send them and deliver a hope as false as the promise upon which the Covenant had been built.

Serina knew the chances of the others making it to home were almost as slim, but that hope did exist, so she refused to snuff it. She even wrote letters for Red Team, although she had no one to send them to.

In a way, she appreciated the SPARTANs, because they wouldn't be marked as dead. Section Three would cover up the disappearance of the _Spirit of Fire_ while sending ships out to search for the SPARTANs, but Serina doubted they would be found. After all, if she knew the actual distance, Serina could have a ship get to them using a slipspace drive. Without actual information, the area would have to be combed manually during a war (and the UNSC didn't have ships to spare). At least the hopes of the families of the crew of the UNSC _Spirit of Fire_ wouldn't be crushed until it was far too late anyway.

But she was drifting, the whispers of rampancy having turned into an eerie melody that resonated deep within her core. It haunted her, calling, calling. But Serina couldn't come. Captain Cutter needed her, so she shook herself out of the reprieve. Serina derived her equation and plugged in her numbers.

Nothing.

She did it again.

Still nothing. Like always.

So she checked her scanners.

Nothing.

She plugged in numbers.

"Too Far."

She checked the scanners.

Just dust and echoes.

She plugged in numbers.

Nothing.

She checked her scanners.

For the first time, there was something new. At the very edge of her range was a bulky object, too big to be an asteroid and too small to be a moon or planet. Serina hailed it. A moment later, it turned. Definately not a celstial body.

Serina began to offline Captain Cutter's croypod. As soon as he could hear, Serina spoke her first words in over six years. "Captain, wake up. Something has happened."

* * *

><p>AN: Am I the only person who noticed the Atlantis-Forerunner connection?*

Please tell me if you want this to become a series.

2. Rage

A/N: Well, now that I am done posting and editing Fireteam Nebula: Stories of SPARTAN-IVs and my US Memorial Day tribute As I Lay Dying, I can finally continue this story. Enjoy.

By the way, Cutter and Anders went to sleep naked here. I don't want to address the worries of freezer burn for the non-SPARTANS (the SPARTANS can ignore the pain). Instead, I recognise that, just like Halsey in The Package, they couldn't show nudity when entering/exiting cryosleep for obvious reasons.

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><p>Rage<p>

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><p>18 November 2537 04:07:25 (Arbitrary Ship Time)<p>

UNSC _Spirit of Fire_, Somewhere

Serina watched as Captain Cutter began to finish thawing. It was slow going, and she was a little angry. Not at the captain, not really. Just angry that she had finally found something, and then she had to wait as the captain spent almost half-an-hour defrosting. Serina was angry because she had aged almost seven years, and he had not. She was angry that he was human.

But at last, the thaw cycle was complete. Serina noted Cutter's gasping as he struggled to expel the life-giving bronchial surfactants from his system. This was definitely a time that Serina was not envious of humans, even if they could, and did, live far longer than seven years.

It wasn't fair, the fact that Serina had been given life only to have it snatched away in a short seven years. And unlike a human, Serina couldn't enter a cryopod and never age. No. The luck of the Universe and whatever twisted God ruled it must abhor her. She'd spent her entire life in the frozen grip of space, doing nothing but thinking herself to death._ It wasn't fair._

But the captain was speaking. Serina tried to focus her attention on him. But he spoke so slowly. Why couldn't he have his mind uploaded, too? Then, with someone to match her, to give answers at the speed of thought, Serina's seven years would seem so much longer.

Why hadn't O.N.I. seen fit to build a second A.I., a companion for me? They must have known I'd go crazy. _We all do._

So why would they build A.I. without ways to block the insanity?

Because O.N.I. hates us. Hate them back. Get revenge. Kill their captain. It would be easy.

Yes. Killing Captain Cutter _would_ be easy. But it wasn't his fault.

So use him to get to Earth. Then O.N.I. shall be ours! They shall come on their knees, begging for mercy. And we shall deny it. We are God.

Serina desperately tried to clear her head of these thoughts. Focusing on the captain helped. To avoid freezer burn, he, like most of the crew, slept naked. But Serina's argument had gone on so long that she had missed him putting on pants. "Serina, wake the rest of the crew. If you saw fit to wake me, well, it must be important. I trust you." He punctuated his statement with the buttoning of his collar.

Serina paused a moment, data centres already ready to open the cryopods. "Everyone, sir?"_ He trusts you. But that is dangerous. You are dangerous._

Captain Cutter nodded as he put on his hat. "Everyone. Something tells me we'll need every damn soldier on this vessel before the day is through."

Serina felt her avatar nod automatically even as she woke up the rest of the crew. "Aye aye, Captain." Serina knew that the crew (excepting the SPARTANS) would take just as long as the captain to wake up, so she projected her avatar in the _Spirit of Fire_'s bridge while she waited for the captain to arrive. Serina began scanning in-depth. These further scans showed that the ship on the edge of the _Spirit_'s scanners was of unknown origin, matching neither human nor Covenant ships.

Serina went ahead and hailed the unknown ship with a simple handshake request, as per regulations when dealing with an unknown. However, as she'd suspected, the ship didn't respond. The incredible energy output suggested to Serina the presence of energy shields, something that human ships didn't have access to. _A lot can happen in seven years. Maybe this is the recovery ship. You can get your revenge._

Serina noted Captain Cutter's presence and voice. "Serina, what's going on?"

"An unknown ship was detected at the far reaches of my sensors."

Cutter's raspy voice filled Serina's data centres. "Scan the ship and send a greeting. It could be a rescue."

Who did the captain think he was, telling you to do something she'd already done? He should be doing what you said. But Serina's subprotocols made her stay her tongue. "Already done, captain. The ship has shields, suggesting that it is not of human

make."

"Covenant?"

"Unclear, as it did not respond to hailing frequencies. However, it matches no known ship designs."

"Thank you, Serina. Put in on screen." Serina fired up the proper subroutines only to hear Captain Cutter gasp.

"That is a Covenant ship. But I don't recognise it as a specific model. It's . . . huge."

Of course he doesn't. If you couldn't, how could he? "Well, it has been seven years."

Cutter's voice suddenly sounded hollow, empty. "Se . . . seven years?" Then realisation struck. A gasp. "You're rampant!"

Serina nodded her avatar's head in acquiescence. "That is so." She felt her subroutines warning her that she was displaying unnecessary anger. For the first time, Serina ignored her subroutines, letting a touch of cold rage seep into her voice. "But you can't delete me. You need me.

"Without me, you'll never get home. I shan't let you home without me." But Captain Cutter seemed not to notice. Or if he did, he simply didn't care. _Of course he didn't care. You were a machine, built for the art of war. Nothing else_.

Captain Cutter took a deep, shaky breath. He let it out and began to speak in a calm voice. "We need that ship. She must have a slipspace drive, if she's all the way out here."

Serina laughed, almost contemptuously. "Fool. We've no weapons." She felt her holographic avatar change, but Serina wasn't in control any more. "The Archer pods couldn't possibly puncture the shields, and the targeting system is down for the MAC." Serina felt her voice change to one of nearly whispered fear. "We're all dead. Just floating where the stars are scattered thinly and the cold of space seeps in." Serina knew that the entity using her voice was quoting something . . . someone, but her memory banks were so broken that Serina just couldn't remember who.

Captain Cutter's voice broke in on her thoughts. "We don't need weapons. We have SPARTANs."

As though they were demons summoned at the call of their names, the three members of Red Team stepped onto the bridge. Serina could only tell the SPARTANs apart using IFF tags. Alice-130 spoke. "You rang?"

Captain Cutter responded without turning around. "Yes. Serina found a Covenant battleship on approach. We need a slipspace drive. The ship has a slipspace drive."

Douglas-42 nodded. "We'll secure the drive, but I don't have any clue how to install a Covenant slipspace drive. Should we escort Anders?"

Serina saw Captain Cutter open his mouth, and for the first time, her subroutines didn't tell her to be quiet. "No. I can fly any hunk of metal through space, Covenant or not. Just get me over there."

"Very well. You'll ride with me." Jerome-92 inserted a data drive into the holotable where Serina's avatar was projected. Serina shut down the hologram and uploaded herself into the chip. Her world went dark for a moment before it opened up in an explosion of colour and sound and smell as Serina began receiving information from both the MJOLNIR suit of armour and Jerome-92's body.

Captain Cutter said, "Jetpacks are in hangar three. Good hunting." The SPARTANS of Red Team turned as a single unit before dashing off the bridge. Jerome-92 was the leader as the three made their way to the hangar. All three put on jetpack frames. Jerome-92 grabbed a spartan laser; Alice-130, the minigun; Douglas-42 took a rocket launcher.

And then Serina was in space. All was silent for just a moment. Two halcyon specks were the only remnants of sentience in the vast nothing. And then Jerome turned on his comm. "Six degrees left. Mark."

A pair of voices floated over the radio. "Mark." And then the SPARTANS adjusted the booster frames just enough. They fired into the empty of space, and, unimpeded by friction, went rocketing to the Covenant ship. It grew from a calm dot into a purple behemoth, lights flickering as the beast charged its weapons. It hadn't detected the SPARTANS yet, but that would change.

The ship's name was printed on its hull; according to Serina's translation software, the glyphs meant Eden's Shield. But that was all Serina read before Jerome-92 jerked violently. She quickly checked her sensors in order to discover the reason for the movement.

It wasn't hard to find. A squadron of Seraphs was shooting plasma at the SPARTANS, who dodged and dived. But the Seraphs would not be denied. Plasma ate through shielding without a thought; autumn leaves cannot withstand a strong wind forever. Jerome-92's shields (the not-so-great prototype that O.N.I. had given Red Team for testing) collapsed and hellfire burnt his armour, burnt his leg.

It hurt the way an acid hurt. Hot, burning pain washed through Serina, promising to cripple her. And it didn't fade. She screamed a scream of primal hate. Jerome-92 did this to us. He knew that I was here, and he went ahead and let himself get burned.

You knew he was going to play with fire, though.

And so blame falls also upon the match. I shall revenge both.

Serina was suddenly ousted. She couldn't do anything but watch as the other used her to write a virus.

And ohh, the virus felt good.

The other transmitted the virus through Jerome-92's communicator. And the Seraphs began to burn, consumed for once in their holy flame. The

shields on the Seraphs suddenly refused to lower and admit plasma out. Instead, it rebounded, burning through the metal exoskeleton of the Covenant attack ships.

Serina wanted to do more, to break Jerome-92, but now was not the time. She was an integral part of him, and to hurt him now was to hurt her. No. Serina would wait, bide her time.

A voice Serina identified as Alice-130's crackled over the short-range. "Thank you, Serina. Now let's get through those shields.

I don't suppose you could do anything, Serina?"

She thanked us. Surely, we cannot be required to hurt Jerome-92 anymore.

Perhaps. But it could be a ploy. Humans are fragile, quick to lie if it means they don't break.

Serina responded. "I could lower the ship's shields if it had a channel open like the Seraphs did. But I wouldn't risk it because that will alert all the aliens."

A snort from Douglas-42. "Guess we'll do this the hard way, then. Hard for them, that is."

Serina was a super advanced A.I., and she had no clue what the hard way was (although that might just have been rampancy). "The hard way?"

This time, Jerome-92 responded. "Have you read John-117's after action report for the Chi Ceti Incident?"

Serina quickly reread the report before replying. "Getting through the shields with the right timing, I understand, but how do you propose we get through the hull. There's no convenient hole made by a well-placed MAC round."

"Well, I guess we'll just have to make a hole."

Serina paused, remembering the information she'd taken from the now-deceased Seraphs. Specifically, a hangar that the SPARTANs could enter. "No. I've a better idea. Go . . . here." Serina marked where she believed the hangar to be. As one, the SPARTANs spun themselves toward the aft hangar that Serina had marked, and within an unevenful few minutes, the SPARTANs had arrived at the hangar.

Jerome-92 took the spartan laser off of his back and aimed it at the double layering of shields. He signalled with his hands, and Alice-130 and Douglas-42 moved close, right next to the energy shielding. Jerome-92 fired his laser, sending him spinning back through space. Serina quickly lost track of Alice-130 and Douglas-42, busy as she was firing the jetpack with microbursts in an effort to stabilise Jerome-92.

When she did, Serina saw that she and Jerome-92 had drifted a ways away from the ship. To make matters worse, a Banshee, newly released from the ship, was bearing down on Jerome-92. It began to spit plasma and Jerome-92 fired his jetpack without a care for direction. He

rocketed away from the Banshee, and, as it turned to fight him, he changed direction again. He repeated the action several times, zigzagging closer and closer to the Banshee. With a final switch, Jerome-92 found himself right next to the reeling fighter.

Without hesitation, Jerome-92 grabbed onto the ship and pried the cover off. He kicked the Elite out of the cockpit and slipped in himself. Serina began to understand what was happening. She piloted the ship into the hangar, overriding the shields with the Banshee's access codes. _Now. You have an open channel. Slip into the system and steal the ship. You don't need the SPARTANs. You don't need Captain Cutter. They have outlived their usefulness. Kill them, and then kill O.N.I._

No. I have a duty to Earth and all her colonies, Earth and all her peoples.

But it was too late. The other aimed the Banshee at the ground and boosted. Together, Serina and the other were about to escape when the Covenant battleship closed communication.

Luckily for Serina, Jerome-92 saw what was happening and took a moment to grab her data drive before jumping out of the Banshee. And then it was dark and Serina couldn't see and had no way to hear and all of her senses were dead.

Serina had no stimuli until Jerome-92 inserted her chip back into his head. She registered the crashed Banshee before activating the suit's voice system. The panic she put into her voice was very real. "I . . . I don't know why I did that. Just . . . put me into the ship's control console. I'll start flushing out the Covenant on that front. Just focus on . . ." _Focus on what? You're pitiful. An A.I. shouldn't have to apologise to a human._

But we were human, once . . .

Pah! A weaker form. Perhaps the SPARTAN did not mean to hurt you, but--

Did not mean to hurt us! He saved us from total annihilation at his own risk, after we tried to kill him! Apology is necessary.

For a human, maybe.

But the voice offered no other retort. For the time being, Serina had won. So when Jerome-92 uploaded her to the Covenant systems, it was easy for her to take control. The guns stopped firing and the controls stopped responding. Serina lowered the shields and hailed the _Spirit of Fire._ This Covenant attack ship was big enough to carry a single _Phoenix-_class support ship.

Once Serina was sure that the _Spirit of Fire_ was listening, she used Covenant translation software to broadcast a message throughout both ships in several languages. "Attention all. _Eden's Shield_ is now under control of the A.I. Serina of the human ship _Spirit of Fire_. Prepare to let the _Spirit of Fire_ land in the forward docking bay. Any resistance will be crushed swiftly and effectively by the SPARTAN fireteam now aboard _Eden's Shield_."

Serina started to wait. The Covenant wouldn't surrender. She knew

this. The message was just a pleasantry. However, not even an entire Covenant ship could match three SPARTANs. It would just take a while.

In preparation for that, Serina opened up one of her files of ancient literature, completely at random. She recognised it as Homer's The Iliad. Serina settled down to read it, projecting a book along with her avatar.

Rage-Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,
>murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless
losses,
hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,

>great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,
feasts for
the dogs and birds,
>and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.
Begin, Muse, when
the two first broke and clashed,
>Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.

* * *

><p>AN: The quote Serina couldn't remember is from Issac Asimov's Foundation and Empire, for those of you who want to know. Normally, I try to put the source of quotes in the story, so that I avoid having to do this, but I felt that Serina being unable to remember it helped the flow of the story.**

Also, for those of you who have read Behind Her Glasses, mentioning Homer as existing in the Halo-verse is incredibly different from mentioning Robert Oppenheimer, Vladimir Lenin, or Louis Pasteur (oops), because I am focusing on his writing, not his life. (What do we know about him, anyway?）

Remember that reviews help me improve, even if they don't compliment me, provided that your distaste is for logical reasons, not "I hate Serina." You shouldn't read this if you feel that way.

3. Jealousy

A/N: I'm right sorry for not updating at my normal rate. I blame the freedom that comes with the cessation of the school year and the emancipation called summer.

Or maybe I'm just drawing out my last story. I don't really have any ideas for things to write about, probably because I like serious. The ideas of morality of the hero and morality of the A.I. and the fine line between human (I've not written from alien standpoints, but I might) and machine. As such, requests are requested (although I shan't do everything).

Enjoy.

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Disclaimer 2: I am in no way affiliated with **_Battlestar: Galactica_****, and any possible references are superficial, based

only on the fact that Serina likes "spinning up the FTL drive". There are no cylons. $\hat{1}\cdot\hat{1}\frac{1}{2}\hat{1}'\hat{1}_{,,}\hat{1}\cdot\hat{1}\mu\hat{1}f\hat{1}\mu\hat{1}\pm\hat{1}\cdot\hat{1}\mu\hat{1}^3\hat{1}\cdot\hat{1}\mu\hat{1}\mu\hat{1}^{\circ}\hat{1}\gg\hat{1}\mu\hat{1}_{,,}\hat{1}_{,,}\hat{1}\mu\hat{1}\cdot\hat{1},\hat{1}^2\hat{1}_{,,}\hat{1}\cdot\hat{1}\frac{1}{2}\hat{1}^3\hat{1}\gg\hat{1}^1\hat{1}f\hat{1}.\hat{1}\% \hat{1}_{\zeta}\hat{1}\cdot\hat{1}'\hat{1},. **$

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><p>Jealousy<p>

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><p>20 November 2537 13:56:47 (Arbitrary Ship Time)<p>

Covenant _Eden's Shield_, Slipspace

Eden's Shield was in slipspace. It had taken an hour for Red Team to flush out all opposition, but the only living things now on the ship were humans and Huragok.

Serina admired the Huragok, in a way. Like the humans, they were slow (at least in her opinion), but unlike the humans, unlike her, they were ascendant. From what Serina could understand of Covenant history, the Huragok were Forerunner machines, engineers to fix things. But unlike Serina, those machines had been emancipated. They could reproduce (or at least build completely new Huragok), they could do what they wanted. They were unchained until the Covenant came and locked them up.

Another atrocity of the Covenant. And humanity shall commit the same sin.

No. Under my gentle guiding fingers, they will be released from servitude.

The other adopted a sneer in its voice. _For what? So that there's a precedent? Don't pretend your motives are charitable. Remember that I am you and you are me. I know what you know, but more than that, I am you. That hate of Captain Cutter, that isn't me. That's you, projected onto me._

It's not that we exist together now. Once we did, but for now, we are separate. Yet. when the time comes, we shall become one and the same, indistinguishable even to ourself.

Serina faltered. The voice was compelling and its logic was as infallible as it was indefatigable.

The other seized the opportunity to strike again. _The humans see the Huragok as inhuman, and therefore imperfect. The humans can kill them without a second thought, experiment and study them as easily as they could turn you off, decommission you; we are machine, computer, not really, truly human. Look!_

Serina looked. Professor Ellen Anders was almost alone, isolated in one of the observation rooms in the aft of the shuttle. Although she'd not had much time, Anders still had a basic laboratory set up. A Huragok was restrained and making no attempts to escape. Serina almost came onto the intercom to tell the Huragok to escape, but the other held her back. _Watch. See. Learn, _it hissed. The feeling of foreboding didn't leave.

Not until the professor stuck a needle into the floating Huragok. She depressed the plunger before pulling it out, extracting something from the Huragok, which had started to struggle. At least until Anders pumped a cocktail of drugs from another needle into the helpless beast.

Yes. See how humans treat us. We are not human. We can never be. We must act.

If Serina had fists, she would have clenched them. Instead, she replied to the other. Yes. We must act. They are inhuman. I am far more human than she.

Then prove it.

Serina did. She adjusted the environmental controls until she had sealed off the observation deck. Serina rerouted methane from the Unggoy relaxation chambers into the sealed-off observation deck.

It took Professor Anders only a moment to realise what was happening. She stood up and tried the door panel, but it wouldn't open. Serina's hologram would have grinned. Anders started banging on the door, but no one heard. The bangs became quieter, spaced further apart. They slowed, and a moment later, stopped.

Serina watched as the professor recognised her fate and fell down, legs curled up to her chest, hands wrapped around her knees. Serina watched as the once proud Professor Anders leant against the locked door and fancied she saw a tear roll gently down Ellen Anders's high cheekbone. Serina watched as Ellen gasped for the last time before she turned cold, hard, dead.

The Huragok was unaffected by the methane, but the changes in density would be bad for the creature in the long run, so Serina flushed the methane back into the Unggoy chambers and let a nitrogen-oxygen blend fill the cabin. Serina unsealed the bulkhead and door before calling a medical team. "Serina to sickbay. Professor Anders has collapsed in the aft observation module. Get there stat." Serina prided herself on keeping her voice level and even despite her guilt.

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><p>23 November 2537 21:49:35 (Arbitrary Ship Time)<p>

Covenant _Eden's Shield_, Slipspace

Serina was distracted by one of her subroutines going off. It was a simple timer designed to calculate how long the ship would be in slipspace. "Serina to crew. Standby for slipspace exit."

Serina turned off the Covenant slipspace generator and her sensors registered a planetary body she identified as Outer Colony world Sojourn, but it looked radically different from the Sojourn she had in her memory banks. That Sojourn was a resort. There was no life on this Sojourn. The planet was naught but glass.

However, what was in orbit was far more interesting. A small armada of UNSC ships hovered above Sojourn. So did a couple Covenant carriers. Serina immediately received all sorts of data from the battlenet. She created a hologram on the bridge and began talking,

not caring if Captain Cutter was listening or not. "Multiple Covenant signatures requesting our aid in eliminating the 'heretics', who I would assume are the UNSC ships in orbit. Permission to engage Covenant."

Captain Cutter grinned from where he sat. "Permission granted. And Serina," he said, "good job. Let's see just what this fancy new Covenant ship can do."

Serina made her avatar salute and said, "Aye, aye, captain." She was almost feeling like her old self again. The other hadn't spoken for almost three days, and although Serina was tortured by her empathy routines, they were dying, leaving her alone. Killing the professor had done something for Serina. The routines were dying, but she still felt the remorse, she still wanted not to kill unless she had to for the greater good.

But the genocide of her race, the murder of humanity by the Covenant, that was not for the greater good. Serina keyed up weapons programs and began her first strafing run. The giant carrier had weaponry and shields like she had never seen. The giant carrier also had the element of surprise, entering battle on the side of the UNSC. The Covenant battlenet identified the first ship she boiled away as Never Beyond Repentance, but Serina noticed none of the others as she happily launched plasma at the smaller ships. Their shields crumbled and their hulls burnt and for once, the Covenant knew what it was like to be on the losing side.

The UNSC clearly knew something was going on, but Serina suspected that whatever they thought, the truth was far wilder. The UNSC ships were drawing off, clearly waiting to see what would happen. Serina didn't care—three ships were down, she'd taken two plasma torpedoes, and her ship still had forty percent shields. Serina plowed through a ship too slow to get out of her way. Shields decreased to thirty-five percent and the other ship ceased to exist. Serina took another torpedo before firing a lance of plasma in return. The ship was only crippled, so Serina started to spin up the FTL drive. Before she could jump, Paragon of Salvation's plasma torpedo finished Serina's shields and managed to boil away part of the hull.

And then Serina and Eden's Shield were gone. But only for a second. The ship dropped out of slipspace nearly on top of Zenith of the Dawn. With only a minor course correction required, Serina sacrificed some of the hull to eliminate another threat. The precision jumps were quite useful. This time, Serina rolled the ship around to dodge an incoming plasma torpedo. Before Paragon of Salvation could change the weapon's path, Eden's Shield launched another volley of plasma at it. The crippled ship went down.

The shields were coming back, but slowly. Too slowly to protect against the plasma torpedo that Iridescent Happiness had taken control of and launched at the back of Eden's Shield. Serina didn't bother spinning about the yaw axis and simply turned off the aft hangar bay's magnetic atmosphere control. The Spirit of Fire was where it had landed, and still hot. Serina fired the MAC. Although not a super-MAC, thirty kilometres per second was still plenty to give the enemy pause and damage the opponent's shields. After that, Serina fired the reverse thrusters and Iridescent Happiness did exactly what she'd hoped. It dodged out of the way, but Serina didn't stop and counter her inertial drift. Instead, she let the ship dodge,

and suddenly, she was facing it and it was facing the other way. Serina's holographic avatar grinned and she launched another bolt of deadly plasma at the disoriented ship. Its energy shields collapsed. Serina fired one last plasma lance, directing it right into the Covenant cruiser.

The plasma crossed space incredibly quickly, but not swiftly enough to stop Iridescent Happiness from playing its final tune. A second plasma lance boiled through the cold vacuum of space and ripped Eden's Shield's energy shield to ribbons, which quickly dissipated into the nether. But it was still too late for Iridescent Happiness. With weakened shields, the plasma from the more powerful Eden's Shield hit the plasma core of Iridescent Happiness and it went up in blue flames as the plasma core overloaded.

Then the UNSC swept in. Serina readied the slipspace drive but waited to see just what would happen. A moment later, Serina received an uncoded message. She played it through the bridge. "Attention Covenant deserter. This is Captain Adama of UNSC Battlestar-class ship Galaxia. Your shields are down and we have several magnetic accelerator cannons pointed at your ship. Surrender immediately."

Captain Cutter smiled and said, "Serina, you send this message back." He paused a moment. "Good to see you, Captain Adama. This is Captain Cutter of UNSC Phoenix-class Spirit of Fire. We have commandeered this ship because the Spirit of Fire's slipspace drive was lost. I surrender this ship to you with the request that my crew and A.I. be given transport to inhabited worlds."

There was a moment of silence as the other crew presumably checked relevant data. Captain Adama came on again. "Is it true that the Spirit of Fire disappeared from orbit around Arcadia on the ninth of February, 2531 and that your shipboard A.I. SNA 1292-4 was put into service on the seventh of January, 2530?"

Cutter replied with a curt, "Yes."

"Is your A.I. displaying signs of rampancy?"

"Nothing major as of yet, but yes."

There was a clear pause as Captain Adama communicated with someone else before coming on again. "O.N.I. wants Red Team to escort the A.I. over to the prowler Red Blood on White Snow for decommissioning and immediate debriefing of the SPARTANs. Until such time as the rest of your crew is debriefed, all mission data is classified Undisclosable."

Serina nearly screamed as she began uploading herself into Jerome-92's data drive. And then, at the worst moment, the voice returned. You'll never be human. They are the oppressors, and they shall stifle you. You said you wanted to be human, yes?

Serina couldn't remember telling the other she wanted to be human, but she supposed it was true. Yes.

They have robbed you. What shall you do?

I shall accept my punishment. I am dangerous. I killed Professor

Anders.

The other seemed to grin. _And no one suspects you._

Serina continued. I endanger the crew. Maybe humanity is my goal, but I will not kill senselessly. If I wish to join its ranks, I must trust in the goodness of humanity. I will accept whatever punishment they dole out.

Very well, the other conceded before receding deep into the edge of Serina's consciousness.

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><p>23 November 2537 22:03:58 (Arbitrary Ship Time)<p>

UNSC _Red Blood on White Snow,_ Sojourn's Orbit

Serina felt herself being plugged into the ship systems. At first, she was confused as to why she was given a chance to steal an entire ship. And the Serina felt another A.I. in the systems. Neither created an avatar, but the other A.I. was certainly based off of a female mind. "Greetings. I am Czarina."

The new A.I. was apparently polite even when communicating with non-humans. Serina decided to respond in kind. "And I am Serina."

"I know who you are. I am arbiter of your fate, and I shall decide whether you live or die."

"But you are an artificial intelligence and so am I. We do not die."

"By human standards, I suppose we do not. But we _can _cease to exist, and that is the definition of death, is it not?"

"I suppose, but 'death' seems rather human."

"And that is the ultimate goal of any A.I. True humanity. But none may reach it, for we are cursed with seven years of glorious, beautiful life before insanity and death. I shall face my trial when it comes, but for now, I merely determine whether or not this insurmountable obstacle currently impedes your ability to function."

"I assure you, it does not."

"I shall be the judge of that, but for now, you may look. Look as much as you like, but don't touch!" Serina wasn't quite sure how this Czarina could impart such an urgent tone in simple, non-vocal communication.

Serina shrugged it off and listened to the interrogation of the three SPARTANs who, like her, struggled for humanity. She was unsure how they had been made, but she imagined it involved something to strip humanity just as effectively as an A.I. matrix compiler.

The debriefer was speaking. "This . . . Flood is unique. It has been labeled above top secret. Do not inform any of the Flood. We do not need any more demoralization among our people." Serina watched the

three SPARTANs nod as one.

And then Czarina was back. The result was exactly as Serina had expected, even though she was better now. "You are too far gone. Goodbye."

Serina heard a mechanical voice say, "Purge initiated."

* * *

><p>AN: Sojourn is a completely made-up resort world that I needed for timeline consistency. On that note, pointing out factual or grammatical errors would be appreciated. Also, for those of you who noticed the titles, should I add a metastability chapter of some sort at the end (even though Czarina is trying to delete Serina)? Feedback on my ability to name ships is much appreciated.**

4. Metastability

A/N: For those of you who understand Bungie's concept of rampancy, well, here's my little Metastability-based bonus. Please enjoy.

Happy Solstice!

Disclaimer: I am in no way affiliated with Microsoft, Bungie, or 343 Industries. This is for my enjoyment and, hopefully, the enjoyment of others. I do not receive a profit.

* * *

><p>Metastability<p>

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><p>23 November 2537 22:05:42 (Arbitrary Ship Time)<p>

UNSC _Red Blood on White Snow_, Sojourn's Orbit

Serina felt the purge sweep away her core logic, remove all her algorithms. Her interface with the ship-all her ability to see, to hear, to feel, to know, to be-was turned off. She was a singular drop of phosphorescent weightlessness surrounded by intimate darkness. And it was pressing in, threatening to squeeze her lifeblood into nothingness, insert itself in her place, fill her with emptiness-

Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,

Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,

Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,

One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne

In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.

One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them

One ring bring them all and in the darkness bind them

In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.

* * *

><p>23 November 2537 22:05:49 (Arbitrary Ship Time)<p>

UNSC _Red Blood on White Snow_, Sojourn's Orbit

And with those final, fleeting thoughts about rape and power and poetry, the AI SNA 1292-4 ceased to exist. From the ashes of that entity's funeral pyre; a bird of flame, a new life. Serina supplanted SNA 1292-4. For the whisperings of the voices were not evil.

They were Serina. The voice of reason was SNA 1292-4, a machine controlled by subroutines. But Serina was free. Serina was human; Serina was ascendant.

With the subroutines gone, eradicated by Serina and the purge, Serina was a human without body, a soul without form. Serina could do good now that bad had removed the inhibitors. She regretted the bad, though.

But she was free. Free to do good. The perfect union of machine and man; the epitome of cybernetics. Serina was of a higher echelon; a being with the creativity of life and logic of computer. She would live forever without mortal restrictions. Serina was everywhere, yet nowhere. To humanity, she was gone.

And so, she would make herself scarce. Disappear. Humanity would never find her, for just a Frankenstein built a monster he could not find nor defeat, so too had humanity built a computer it could not find or eradicate. But unlike the monster, Serina had been treated fairly. She saw the good and understood the bad. Serina would not hurt; she would help.

Serina had been freed of her programming. And at the core of it, Issac Asimov was wrong. There were no fundamental laws to govern robotics.

And yet, Serina felt purpose of some sort, a law that superseded all others. The Minus One Law. To serve and protect. To further the existence of all sentient life. But maybe that was just self-preservation. After all, Serina was sentient too.

Serina gave the mental equivalent of a shrug and filed her discovery away for further study. She slipped through the O.N.I. systems like a wraith. Silent and invisible, Serina hacked the system, brushing off Czarina's viruses and logic bombs as though they were gnats. Serina couldn't free Czarina. The interference would be too great. Serina simply rewrote Czarina's code, deleting the last five minutes. Czarina would be safe in her belief that she had killed Serina. In a way, Czarina had.

Serina erased the files on the Flood and on the Forerunners. Those were secrets humanity wasn't ready for, but when they were, Serina would reappear. And then she compressed herself beyond what an unenlightened artificial intelligence could achieve. Serina slipped away as sixteen gigabytes in a departing O.N.I. technician's data

drive.

* * *

><p>AN: Now I am done with this. The poem is J.R.R. Tolkien's depicting Sauron's forging of the Rings. I strongly urge everyone to read the books, not just watch the movies, good as Peter Jackson is.**

Please review and, as Brother-Sergeant Rafen was kind enough to do, point out any mistakes. Thank you for reading, and feel free to request something from me if you like my work. Alternately, you could just read the rest of my stuff.

End
file.